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E X T R A C T S  
FROM A  
S P E E C H,  
MADE BY  
*MAXIMILIEN ROBERTSPIERRE,*  
IN THE  
N A T I O N A L C O N V E N T I O N,  
ON THE TENTH OF MAY, 1793.

**M**AN is born to enjoy happiness and liberty, yet every where he is miserable and enslaved. Governments are instituted for the preservation of his rights, and to perfection his faculties, yet every where governments degrade and oppress him. The time is come which is to restore him to the state he was intended for; the progress of information has prepared a great revolution, and to you it belongs to accelerate it. To fulfil your duty in this respect, you are to practice exactly the contrary of what has hitherto been done. Hitherto the art of governing has been the art of despoiling and enslaving the majority, to the advantage of a few; and legislation the art of reducing those crimes to a regular system. Kings, aristocrats have played their parts admirably well: to you it belongs now to do your duty, and to render men happy and free by the means of wholesome laws.

To give to government energy sufficient, that citizens may ever respect the right of their fellow-citizens, and to prevent government from encroaching on those rights. This is my opinion, the double problem that legislators have to solve.

THE first appears to me easy ; the other one might be tempted to consider as insolvable, if a cursory view only is taken of present and past events, without examining their cause. Read history and you will every where see rulers oppressing citizens ; governments swallowing up sovereignty. Tyrants speaking of sedition, the people complain of tyranny, when the people dare to complain, which is when excessive oppression restores their energy and independence. Would heaven, they could always preserve these ; but the reign of the people is of a day ; that of tyrants stains the history of ages.

I HAVE heard much said of the anarchy since the revolution of July 14th, 1789, and especially since that of the 10th of August, 1792.—But in my opinion it is not anarchy that is the malady of the political body, but despotism and aristocracy. I am of opinion, whatever may be said to the contrary, that it is only from that apocha, which is so much abused, that we have had a beginning of laws and government, notwithstanding some disturbances, which are nothing more than convulsions of expiring royalty, and the last struggle of a faithless government against equality.

POLITICAL evils never are occasioned by the people, but are caused by the government.—

How could it be otherwise? The people are interested in the public good; the man in office has a private interest.

If I choose to stoop to answer absurd prejudices, I would say, that power and opulence are the parents of vice; that poverty, mediocrity and industry, are the supporters of virtue; that the weak only ask for the protection of mild laws; that the passions of the powerful tend to raise them above just laws, or to produce tyrannical laws.

GOVERNMENT is instituted to cause the general will to be obeyed; but men who govern, have a will of their own, and every will tends to make itself obeyed. If they employ to this effect the public force, with which they are armed, the government becomes a scourge. Agree then, that the first object of every constitution ought to be to defend public liberty against the encroachments of the government.

It is this principal object that legislators have forgotten—they have all studied to give governments energy; none of them thought of bringing it back to its original intention. They have taken infinite precautions against insurrections of the people; but have at the same time encouraged all in their power the revolt of their delegates. I have already given the reason of this. Ambition, violence and perfidy, have legislated for the world. They have even enslaved human reason, by first debasing it, and have rendered that reason, thus perverted, the instrument of man's misery.

DESPOTISM produced the corruption of manners ; and the corruption of manners supported despotism. In this state of things, the contest is, who shall sell his soul to the strongest, to legalize injustice and deify tyranny. .

OBSERVE even those among legislators, whom the progress of political information appears to have impressed with some principles—observe whether they have not perverted their talents to elude them, when they clashed with their personal interest. Observe whether they have done any thing more than vary the forms of despotism, and determine the nice shades of aristocracy. They have pompously proclaimed the sovereignty of the people, and have enslaved them ; at the time they acknowledged magistrates as the servants of the people, they have treated them as their masters and idols. All have agreed in supposing the people mad and factious, and public functionaries absolutely wise and virtuous. Without seeking for examples of this among foreign nations, we can find some very striking in the bosom of our own revolution, and even in the conduct of the legislators, our predecessors.

SEE with what baseness they burnt the incense of adulation, at the altar of royalty ; with what impudence they preached up confidence in the public functionaries, whom they knew to be perfidious ; with what violence they defamed the people ; with what barbarity they abused them. And yet see on which side the civic virtues weighed ; the generous sacrifices of indigence ; the shameful avarice of wealth ; recollect the heroic conduct of the private soldiers—

the base treasons of their officers ; the invincible courage ; the magnanimous patience of the people—the vile egotism ; the odious perfidy, of so many of the public functionaries.

BUT do not let us be surprised at the sight of so much injustice, when we consider the nation has just emerged from a state of the deepest corruption ; how could a great portion of our representatives be expected to shew respect for humanity ; to love equality, and believe in virtue.

UNFORTUNATE that we were ! We were attempting to erect a temple to liberty, with hands yet galled with the chains of despotism. What was our former education, but a continual lesson of self-love and vanity ? What were our customs, and what we called our laws, but a code of nonsense and baseness, in which men were classed in a whimsical gradation, and more or less despised, according to a multiplicity of fantastical distinctions ?

To despise and be despised ; to creep to the seat of power ; slaves and tyrants by turns—one moment kneeling before a master, the next trampling under feet the people : such was our fate ; such was our ambition, of almost all of us ; whether well born, lawyers or financiers ; whether councillors, or belonging to the army. Is it to be wondered at, that so many conceited merchants ; so many vain cits held in sovereign contempt the class of artisans, when they in their turn were treated in the same manner by the nobility ? Oh what a noble pride ! Oh ! the wonderful education ! And yet it is for this that the happiness of the world is checked ! For this

the bosom of our country is torn by traitors ! For this the savage satellites of the despots of Europe have destroyed our crops ; burnt our cities ; massacred our women and children. The blood of 300 thousand Frenchmen has been shed, and perhaps an equal number are yet to perish ; that the plain farmer should not hold a seat in the senate with the rich dealer in grain ; that the artisan should not have a vote in the assemblies of the people, as well as the illustrious merchant or the presuming lawyer ; and that the poor, but intelligent and virtuous citizen be not allowed to appear as becomes a man in the presence of the wealthy and profligate fool.

INFATUATED men, you who cry out for masters, that you may have no equals ; do you believe then that the tyrants will agree to realize the dreams of your presumptuous vanity and base cupidity ? Do you believe that the people, after having conquered for liberty, and shed their blood in the defence of their country, when you reposed in the arms of indulgence and luxury, or conspired against them, will suffer you to enslave them ? No—if you respect neither humanity, justice nor honor, at least study your interest as far as it respects your treasures, which have no other enemy than the excess of human misery, which you so imprudently aggravate.—But what reasoning can weigh with proud slaves ? The voice of truth thundering in a depraved heart, resembles those sounds which are heard in funeral vaults without awakening the dead.

You then, to whom liberty and your country is dear, undertake alone the task of saving the

public weal, and since the moment when its darkest dangers appear to call for your whole attention, is when an attempt is made to raise the edifice of the constitution with improper haste, found it at least upon the eternal basis of truth. Establish as a first principle, *that the people are good; their delegates corruptible; that it is in the virtue and the sovereignty of the people that a preservative against the vices and despotism of government is to be found.*

FROM the principle I have endeavored to establish, let us now draw some consequences useful in practice, which may form a solid basis for a free constitution.

THE corruption of governments flows from excess of powers, and their independence of the sovereign: Find a remedy for this two-fold abuse.

FIRST lessen the influence of magistrates.—Hitherto politicians, who have appeared to make some efforts, less to defend liberty, than modify tyranny, have only been able to suggest two modes of effecting this—the balance of powers, and tribunes for the people.

As to the balance of powers, we may have been the dupes of that illusion, at a time when fashion appeared to require of us to give a mark of applause grateful to our neighbours, at a time when our own degradation left us to admire all foreign institutions with any thing like a shadow of liberty to recommend them. But with little reflection, it is easy to perceive, that that balance must be either a chimera or a scourge; that it supposes the government a total nullity, did it not necessarily occasion a league between

the rival powers against the people ; for it must easily be perceived, that they will rather agree among themselves, than call in the sovereign to judge in his own cause. Witness England, where the gold and power of the monarch always inclines the scale on one side, where the opposition party appears to solicit a reform in the national representation only to retard it, in concert with the majority, which they seem combating ; a species of government monstrous, where the social virtues are only to be found in appearance ; where the phantom of liberty excludes the reality ; where law sanctifies despotism, and the rights of the people are the objects of open traffic ; where corruption is even disengaged from the shackles of modesty. And what are to us the contrivances that balance a tyrannic authority ! It is tyranny itself that must be extirpated. It is not during the differences of their masters only, that the people wish to breath a few moments ; it is in their own strength they should repose for the security of their rights ; for the same reason I am not in favor of tribunes ; history has not taught me to respect them.

I WILL trust so great an interest (that of the people) with no one man—they are all weak and corruptible. Protection from tribunes, presupposes the people slaves. I do not like to see the Roman people retiring to the holy mount, and thence asking for protectors from a despotic senate or insolent patricians ; I wish them to remain in Rome, and thence to drive all tyrants. I hate as much as I hate those patricians themselves, and I despise much more, the ambitious

tribunes, those vile proxies for the people, who sell to the wealthy of Rome, their speeches and their silence, and who only defended their rights now and then, better to bargain when they come to barter them for gold. There is but one tribune of the people that I can acknowledge—the people themselves ; it is to each section of the French Republic, that I wish to confide the power of tribune ; and it will be easy to organize them in such a manner as to free them from the storms of absolute democracy, and the perfidious calm of representative despotism. But before we think of placing barriers to protect civil liberty against the overflowings of the power of magistrates, let us first define the just limits of that power.

A FIRST rule to attain this end is, to fix short periods from one election to another, applying this principle in an inverse ratio to the quantum of power entrusted.

2d. ESTABLISH, that no one shall hold more offices than one at the same time.

3d. THAT the powers be divided. It is better to multiply public officers, than trust to a few, a formidable power ; let legislation and execution be totally separated.

LET the various departments in the execution be entrusted to different hands, and to as many hands as the nature of the business will allow.

ONE of the great faults of the present organization is, the too great extent of each of the ministerial departments, in which are collected various branches of administration very distinct in their nature.

PUBLIC opinion ought to be the guide of men in public life, and public men should not attempt to guide or form public opinion.

I SHALL be asked, perhaps, how, with such severe restraints upon public functionaries, I can secure obedience to the laws and government? I answer, that thereby I strengthen that security; by those very precautions I give to the laws and government the influence I take from the vices of men who govern and make laws.

THE respect which a public functionary inspires, depends much more upon the respect he shews for the laws, than on the power he usurps—and the power of the laws lies much less in the military force ready to enforce them, than on their agreeing with the principles of justice and the general will. When the law has for basis the interest of the people, it will have the people for support, and its energy will rest upon the energy of the whole community, of which it is the work.

THE general will and public force have the same origin; the public force is to the political body, what the arm is to the human body, executing what the will commands, and repelling every thing that menaces the head and heart.

WHEN the public force seconds the general will, the country is free and quiet; when they differ, the country is either enslaved or its tranquillity disturbed.

THE public force contradicts the general will in two instances; either when the law is not an expression of the general will, or when the magistrate employs it to violate the law. Such was the horrid anarchy that tyrants have ever esta-

blished, under the name of tranquillity, good order, legislation and government. All their arts consists in insulating and oppressing each citizen with the public force ; to render them all slaves to their caprice, which they dignify by the name of law. Legislators enact just laws—magistrates cause them to be punctually executed, and you will give to the world a new spectacle, that of a great people, free and virtuous.

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E X T R A C T  
FROM AN  
O R A T I O N,

*Delivered at Federal Point, near Philadelphia, on  
the FOURTH of JULY, 1793, by ELIHU PAL-  
MER, citizen of Pennsylvania ; and published by  
request of those who heard it.*

Friends and Fellow Citizens !

THE age of reason and philosophy has at length arrived, and begins to illuminate the world ! While that veil of darkness, which spread itself over all nations, was faithfully preserved by the *pious* alliance of CHURCH and state, the earth wore a wretched aspect, and humanity wept for the miseries of man. But when enlightened men began to examine the cause of human wretchedness, and by their efforts had penetrated the secret corruption of royal courts, the pillars of despotism were shaken to the foundation. King-craft and priest-craft, those mighty enemies to reason and liberty, were struck with death by the genius of 1776. For seventeen years they have been decaying under the influence of a mortal wound, and now in the last stage of their existence, like a drowning man catching at a straw, one more desperate effort is making to preserve them from inevitable destruction. But they are summoned with a mighty voice to the dark abodes of oblivion, “ to which I wish them a speedy and unobstructed passage,” never more to raise again to scatter mischief among deluded nations.

IN this view of the subject, and considering the consequences, it is impossible not to admire the manly firmness which dictated the declaration of American Independence. Those bold patriots deserve, and will undoubtedly obtain the thanks and applause of all posterity. How much is it to be lamented, that any whose names we see affixed to that great instrument, should at this day afford good ground of suspicion, that their political principles are directed to the total destruction of LIBERTY and EQUALITY. But the genius of liberty is rousing from slumber, and will eventually emancipate the world. Beware, ye American aristocrats! your principles and efforts are leading you to a precipice, from which the just resentment and indignation of an injured people will hurl you into eternal infamy. Civil and religious oppression will not gain much ground in the American world, though attempts are making to effectuate both. If the cause of France, which is the great cause of human nature, should succeed, then farewell kings, aristocrats, and the long catalogue of clerical impositions—impositions which have robbed man of his greatest dignity, and closed every avenue of independent reflection. Indeed, had it not been that the clergy gained a complete ascendancy over the minds of men, the civil oppressions of the world would long since have tumbled into ruin. But living on the spoils of the people, it was easy for these impostors to preach up the beauty and excellency of humiliating poverty, that they themselves might riot upon the luxuries of the earth. And thus while they degraded

the human character and feasted on the iniquitous profits, they aided the already too potent arm of the civil tyrant, and prepared every living creature for the completest slavery.

How lamentable is it, that religion, which ought to unite all hearts, should so often be made use of as a cloak for the commission of the greatest crimes, and by those very men too, who have so often imposed themselves upon the world as persons of superior sanctity and virtue. I do not mean to insinuate in this place that there are not virtuous and upright individuals among this body of men ; but, take them as a body, they have done infinite mischief, and many of them merit the curses of the present and all future ages. In justice, however, to the American clergy, it ought to be observed, that in effecting our revolution, many of them by their precepts and example afforded great service, and were truly valuable members of the community. I wish it could be said at this day, that none of them assumed the mysterious carriage and imaginary dignity of an European bishop.\*

BUT the enlightened friends of humanity, may congratulate each other upon a glorious

\* *In the state of Connecticut, they are thought generally to have deviated from the revolutionary principles of 1776. " The clergy in Connecticut (says Mr. Morse) have hitherto preserved a kind of aristocratical balance in the very democratical government of the state ; which has happily operated as a check upon the overbearing spirit of republicanism."*

[MORSE'S GEOG.]

prospect. The empire of reason will soon sweep from off the earth this bundle of nonsense and oppression, and permanently fix the attention of the human mind upon a point essential to its dignity and happiness. Already have the two revolutions of America and France awakened in the intellectual world a new energy of thought, and turned the pursuit of man upon scientific principle into the path of liberal discussion. Previous to these great events—events unparelleled in the history of ages, every pursuit of man was tinctured with the despotism of *church* and *state*. Scarcely a single art or science could be independently investigated without fear and trembling; at least it was first to be enquired how the proof of any proposition would affect the power and influence of those two *holy* sisters, who subjugated the earth in perpetual bondage. The rights, dignities, and essential privileges of the human race, were buried in the gulph of royal and clerical avarice and deception. But these days of fanaticism and oppression are vanishing away, and the philosophy of the human mind is making deep researches, to develop the nature of those principles, which will afford a permanent hope to the wretched in every part of the world.

THE cries of millions of innocent sufferers are calling aloud upon reason and philosophy to come forth to their aid, and lead them with a powerful hand to the land of light and joy. And it is a matter of unusual consolation, that the two great events, previously mentioned, have

so far contributed to stimulate reflecting men to investigate the principles of nature, as leads to a hope, that a lasting source of felicity may be established for the great family of mankind. Not much longer shall superstitious impostors *decimate* the fruits of man's industry : but the principles of government, religion, literature, and morals, shall receive that candid and impartial discussion, which the nature and importance of the several subjects require. Already great improvements have been made, and though many are in dread of innovations, yet I conceive no good ground of apprehension has been shewn on these subjects.

THE philosophy of this age, teaches the most pure and unadulterated morality ; and stripping religion of its mysteries and external trappings, will present it to the view of the human mind in more beautiful and attractive charms : so that in every point of view, these great political events will serve to ameliorate the condition of the human race.